

Understanding Challenging Behavior

It's not easy to know how to respond to difficult behavior in our classrooms. Some of this behavior, like tantrums or arguments, can be addressed in the moment. Other behavior feels more significant and harder to address.

What are some signs that a student might need extra support? We can look out for:

- **patterns** of negative behavior
AND
- **changes** in behavior

In addition to watching out for these signs, it's also important to **trust yourself** to know when something with a student is off.

What might be causing a pattern of negative behavior or a behavior change?

Some students feel overwhelmed because of an underlying problem, like a **developmental delay**. Others might be experiencing a **mental health issue**. And some might be reacting to a **stressful environment**. Some children might be experiencing two or more of these at once.

It isn't our job to diagnose these issues. But we can identify who might need help and we can be part of a larger "village" that supports them. Helping students in small ways can make a big difference for them, and it makes our classrooms run smoother, too.

Here are **three examples of students** who need some extra support:

1. Pattern of Negative Behavior

Tommy was hitting, and it often happened during transitions. He was clearly frustrated, but it wasn't clear why until he had a hearing test that showed that his hearing was an issue.

2. Change in Behavior

Renee was toilet trained and suddenly started having accidents. It turned out her dog had died and she was extremely upset.

3. Something Felt Off

Annie was very quiet and kept to herself. It was easy to overlook her because she wasn't disruptive--but something didn't feel right. Turns out she'd seen violence in her neighborhood and was having a hard time coping.

Building Relationships With Caregivers and Students is Key

In each case above, the caregiver had critical information--like knowing about Renee's dog. Or the caregiver was a critical part of addressing the problem--like Tommy getting a hearing aid and helping Annie see a psychologist.

Day-to-day, there are lots of chances for us to connect with young children, help them manage their emotions, and build relationships with their families. The relationships children have at a young age lay the foundation for how they go on to build relationships of their own. And the relationships *you* have with them have a lifelong impact on their development.

Addressing Challenging Behavior

Here are some approaches that can help you de-escalate a difficult situation:

Check in with yourself. This helps manage your own emotions. Similar to airplane oxygen masks: the adult always puts theirs on first before helping a child. It also sets a good example for children.

"How am I feeling right now?"

"What does the child need right now?"

Use neutral words and a neutral tone so children don't feel they're in trouble.

✘ *"You were misbehaving during arts and crafts."*

✔ *"You had a lot of feelings during arts and crafts."*

Reinforce the behaviors you want to see, rather than focusing on what they're doing wrong.

✘ *"Great job not yelling!"*

✔ *"Great job using your inside voice!"*

Give children choices of ways to calm down. This creates a chance to practice and helps them feel in control.

“Do you want to scoot near me or stand?”

After you de-escalate, it’s important to “debrief”: help the child calm down, then help them find better ways to communicate. In addition to the approaches above, you can also:

Get them to brainstorm or role-play what they could do next time. This helps them develop a set of tools.

TEACHER: “What can you say next time you’re feeling angry and need some space?”

CHILD: “I can say I need some space, please.”

Create a safe space or cozy corner to help children regulate themselves. This isn’t a “time out spot” for punishing students. It’s a safe, cozy space for students to think and calm down. Teach them how to use it before they need to.

Case Study: Eli in The Classroom

Ms. Kelly and her co-teacher Ms. Zoe have 20 students in their class. Here’s what we know about Eli, one of their students.

- Eli is four and very social.
- He sometimes has trouble *regulating* his body.
- When Eli is excited or frustrated, he can get too close to his friends’ faces, and hug them tightly. You’ve noticed a pattern: sometimes that results in Eli accidentally hitting or kicking them.

During circle time today, Ms. Kelly was reading a book about whales. Eli got very excited and wanted to get closer. He started waving his arms and stomping his feet, accidentally hitting his friend Marcus. Marcus wasn’t hurt, but he was upset and shouted: “Eli pushed me!”

There were two ways Ms. Kelly wanted to support Eli and the class in this moment:

1. Help Eli Regulate Himself

MS. KELLY: “It’s important that we all feel comfortable. Let’s remember all the different ways we talked about sitting: there’s criss-cross applesauce or having our legs out in front of us. And don’t forget, you can stand if your body would feel more comfortable that way! Now, everyone think, is my body comfy? Am I far enough away from my friends? Can I see the book?”

2. Refocus the Class on the Activity

MS. KELLY: "Now, it's good that we're all so excited about the ocean, but we have to remember our inside voices. Before we go on, let's all count to five. Everyone ready? Let's count together."

Case Study: A Chat With Eli

Sometimes even when you do everything right, children can still be upset. Ms. Kelly gave Eli a choice between standing and scooting near her, but he continued to be upset. He chose to go to the cozy corner while Ms. Kelly finished the activity with the group. She made sure to give him a few minutes alone to calm himself down. Afterward, while the other children were at mini-activity stations, Ms. Kelly went to check in with Eli at the cozy corner. Here are the goals Ms. Kelly had in her conversation with Eli and the way she accomplished them.

Check in with Eli

MS. KELLY: "A lot of stuff happened at Circle Time. How are you feeling now? Sometimes it's hard to understand our feelings. But maybe we can take some time now and talk together. How does that sound?"

Help him identify his feelings

ELI: "Yeah. The ocean is big! And whales are BIG! And I wanted to see, but Marcus was in the way and I didn't like it."

MS. KELLY: "Because you were excited about the ocean, you were worried about not being able to see."

Help him problem-solve for the future

MS. KELLY: "What can you do if you can't see the book?"

ELI: "Uhhh... move."

MS. KELLY: "That's right, you can move closer to me."

ELI: "I like being close to you."

Planning Ahead

A positive atmosphere can be very helpful to children who are struggling or come to school feeling stressed.

There are a several ways you can develop a caring, safe-feeling atmosphere for all your students. You probably do some of these already.

- **Set expectations for your space**, including a daily schedule. Write them down and add visuals.
- **Talk about expectations and feelings** throughout the day. For example, before circle time you might talk about *expectations* around steady bodies and taking turns while talking. You could share some *strategies* like raising hands, and discuss how it makes everyone *feel* when we sit still and listen to each other.
- **Teach feeling words** and help children connect words to what they're feeling. Story time is great for this. It helps children express themselves using a common language.
- Start the day by **asking students how they're feeling**. This helps them identify feelings, and lets you know what they might need.
- **Practice breathing and movement exercises** with students. This gives everyone a chance to pause and calm down.
- **Plan ahead** with your teaching team. Strategize for high-stress moments like shift changes and transitions. Talk about what situations push your students' buttons and what behaviors signal an escalation. For example, with Eli you you know to keep an eye out during circle time!

Making these things a routine part of the day means you won't need to work as hard in the moment. And you'll notice when a child may need extra support.

Talking with a Caregiver

When conversations with our students' caregivers go well, we gain a partner. There's a lot you can do to support the child and address concerns or underlying issues together. A few quick conversations with caregivers can save us a lot of time, work, and stress. And children can tell you're working together--so that might give you a little more leverage in school.

How can we make sure that these conversations go well?

Build trust and set a tone of caring. Building trust with a caregiver goes a long way toward making conversations easier. Even small chats at drop-off and pick-up can really nurture the relationship.

But sometimes we need to raise a concern very early in the relationship (see Leroy's Case Study). In those cases, we have to take extra care to set the right tone. Since we need their help and trust, it's no use trying to rush things. Next steps could be as small as finding another time to talk.

Check in with yourself and examine your feelings. That will help you keep your cool. Anticipate what might upset them. If they do get upset, it's good to take a second and check in with yourself again.

Start with strengths. Share examples of what the child is doing well, to show you see the child is more than their difficult moments, that you're on their side.

Describe the behavior, and the larger pattern, with **neutral and descriptive language**.

✘ *"Mason was mean and got aggressive with another child."*

✔ *"Mason hit another child with his arm at the park."*

Get the caregiver's perspective. They're the expert on the child outside of class, so show them you value their input. Ask what they've noticed and what strategies work for them.

Collaborate on a plan. This might include trying some things that work at home or seeing if they might want to try something that works at school.

Case Study: Talking With Rosa, Eli's Mother

Ms. Kelly chats with Rosa at pickup and dropoff, mentioning things Eli is doing well when she can. She also mentions times when Eli has gotten excited, frustrated, or hit a friend, and different approaches she's tried, but hasn't had time to get into problem-solving. After the incident where Eli accidentally hit Marcus, Ms. Kelly found a little extra time to talk with Rosa. Here are some moments that went well.

Set a tone of trust and caring.

MS KELLY: "Part of what I wanted to share is that Eli has been doing well in class. Yesterday, when we were building with blocks, Eli made a tower that was pretty high above everyone else's. And then, when Sophia's fell down, and she started crying, he went over and helped her build one just as high."

Share your observations about where Eli needs more support and what approaches have been working.

MS KELLY: "Earlier today, we were reading a book about whales. I know how much Eli likes the sea, and he was getting pretty excited. He couldn't see as well as he wanted, so he tried to get his friend to move. We've noticed when Eli has big feelings he has a hard time controlling his body, so he ended up accidentally hitting his friend."

Learn about Eli's behavior at home and what Rosa does in response.

MS KELLY: "I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me. As much as Ms. Zoe and I try to get to know Eli, we're never going to be able to understand him the way you do. Could you tell me a little about what Eli's like when he's with you, at home?"

Collaborate on a plan.

MS. KELLY: "It sounds like the reward system you have in place at home helps Eli, which makes it easier for him to be aware of how he's feeling, and what he can do with his body."

ROSA: "That could work. Eli tends to like that... when we tell him he's doing a good job. Maybe I could take him out for ice cream at the end of the week, or something."

Case Study: Talking with Leroy, Sophia's Grandfather

Sophia is three. When Sophia gets dropped off, she usually smiles and runs to join her friends. But in the last few weeks, Ms. Kelly noticed some changes.

- Sophia's mom usually picks her up; but lately, it's been Leroy.
- Since then, Sophia's been coming in whining and hasn't seemed excited by her favorite activities.
- She's been playing with her friends less and throwing tantrums when she doesn't get her way.

This was the first time Ms. Kelly discussed Sophia with Leroy, and it wasn't an easy conversation. Ms. Kelly had to change her approach. She focused more on building a relationship with Leroy and letting him know she wants to work as a team. Here are some ways Ms. Kelly was able to meet the goals of the conversation:

Set a tone of trust and caring.

MS KELLY: "Sophia has plenty of moments where she's been as curious and excited as usual. Like, just today, she was making a fish, gluing shells to colored paper, and... it came out really well!"

Share your observations about where Sophia needs more support and what approaches have been working.

MS KELLY: “Recently I’ve noticed that Sophia hasn’t been quite as interested in playing with her friends. Like, yesterday, a friend of hers wanted to play dress up with her, but Sophia wanted to be alone, and sat off to the side with a book.”

Learn about Sophia’s behavior at home and what Leroy does in response.

MS. KELLY: “Since you know Sophia better than almost anyone... any thoughts on what we could try in class with her?”

Leroy was taken aback by this question. He wondered why a teacher wanted his advice: “Isn’t that *your* job?” Ms. Kelly handled his frustration well: “It is. It’s *my* job to support her at school. And if you have something that’s helped her at home that I could use when she’s here... I’m open to listening.”

Collaborate on a plan.

MS. KELLY: “Maybe we can find another time soon to brainstorm about how to support Sophia? Or even if you just want to come back and join us for a day to read with her, I’m sure she’d love that.”

LEROY: “Okay... yeah. That might work. I’ll let you know.”

Ms. Kelly knew that partnering and creating a plan, like she’d done with Rosa, wasn’t as possible in this situation. Leroy seemed to need more time to build up trust. Sometimes just starting the conversation and planning to meet again is enough. Ms. Kelly had a chance to learn some really important information about why Sophia might be struggling at school, and now Leroy knows that Ms. Kelly’s in Sophia’s corner.